Publishing stir isn't a first

WL MORNING NEWS 12/22/66

By RICHARD SPONG
Editorial Research Reports

"I still wake up at night and hear the stutter of the drums on Pennsylvania Avenue," said William Manchester in a press conference on March 26, 1964. "I still hear a silent hymn of grief within."

The press conference was called for the announcement by Robert F. Kennedy, then attorney general, that Manchester had been selected by Mrs. John F. Kennedy to write the story of her husband's assassination. Manchester must still hear the drums, but they no longer stutter. They have become a wild combination of rim shot and paradiddle and bass beats that add up to no silent hymn but rather to cacaphony. The beat and counter beat arise out of Manchester's soon to be published book, "The Death of a President," and they reflect both agony and paradox.

The facts of the Manchester book story are too well publicized to be rehearsed here. Manchester was chosen as the one to write the "authorized" version of the Kennedy assassination in part because the late President had admired Manchester's previous work; in part, it seems obvious, because Manchester had been so openly committed to John F. Kennedy and the New Frontier.

The Kennedys reserved the right to approve the manuscript. Manchester asserts that Sen. Robert F. Kennedy did just that in a letter of last July.

Personalities continue to cloud the issues. Handling the book for Harper & Row is Evan Thomas, an old Kennedy friend, who published John Kennedy's "Profiles in Courage." The man at Look, the magazine which has serialization of the book scheduled to begin Jan. 10, is William Attwood, editor-in-chief, who worked in the 1960 campaign for John F. Kennedy. It is scarcely conceivable that either would willingly have hurt Mrs. Kennedy or the Kennedy family, but both had to remember that grea amounts of money are involved.

The merits of the Manchester book are not in question here. It is said to be extremely critical of President Johnson and to expose some intimacies offensive to Mrs. Kennedy.

It is not, however, the first book that has aroused the ire of the Kennedy family. The manuscript of "The Pleasure of His Company," by Paul Fay, was revised at Kennedy request but Fay is still persona non grata with the family. Jim Bishop has complained that Mrs. Kennedy had attempted to keep him from writing a book about the assassination. "The one woman in the world I would like to hurt least is Mrs. Kennedy," said Bennett Cerf, chairman of Random House, "but I'm also Jim Bishop's publisher, and if I didn't publish his book, others would."

Attempts at prior censorship of books have been frequent recently. Howard Hughes, the financier, has acquired copyrights which his lawyers say prohibit any unauthorized biographies. The widow of Ernest Hemingway tried but failed to prohibit the publication of "Papa Hemingway." Warren Spahn has so far succeeded in enjoining a biography. And even the U.S. Justice Department has managed to prevent the publishing of the reminiscences of Cosa Nostra gangster Joe Valachi.

What has been generally overlooked in all the controversy is that the Kennedy suit will probably sell an additional 500,000 copies of the Manchester book, when it is published.